

TV Can Be So Magnificent; Why Must It Be So Bad?

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL effect of television is an area of behavioral science where everyman is his own expert. President Nixon has encouraged more explicit studies, however, in common with "very many Americans who were concerned with the ethical as well as the artistic level of many TV programs and commercials." Sen. John O. Pastore (D-R.I.) has pointedly demanded that the Public Health Service study the possible pathology in children exposed to scenes of sex and violence on TV, and the Surgeon General, Dr. William H. Stewart, has just announced a scientific advisory committee on television and social behavior.

The committee is supposed to confine its studies to scientific findings from work already published, and to make no policy recommendations. If that limitation is taken seriously, the committee is a waste of effort. The scientific literature on the subject can be read in one afternoon. For such an immense and difficult subject, it is inevitably shaky and inconclusive. The effects of advertising on consumer behavior make a far more impressive demonstration than any conceivable experiment.

Policy recommendations are precisely what we should hope to get, not impossible scientific rigor. This commission can furnish the additional perspective of expertise in behavioral science, which can support tentative generalizations from scientifically more approach-

able aspects of human behavior.

ONE PRINCIPLE that must not be overlooked is that a television audience is made up of an enormous variety of individuals with highly varied responses to all kinds of stimuli and especially to those with an emotional load. Whatever behavior might be taught or triggered by some particularly violent obscenity could always have been provoked by different intrusions from the world we inhabit.

But is this what we have to prove? Or should the committee not investigate whether the regulated monopolies of spectrum space are fulfilling their positive potentialities for social benefit? Can the networks prove that a diet of sex and violence is the best achievable use of a magnificent technology and a legitimate discharge of the public trust?

Pointing out that the Federal Communications Commission vests such a trust in the holder of a license against the random wishes of other citizens, the Supreme Court has finally disposed of the idea that the broadcaster owns the channel for his personal whim and profit under the cloak of "free speech."

TV can be so magnificent that I have to wonder what forces it to be so bad so often. The main reason may be that there just is not enough creative talent to meet the sudden demand, and we are then afflicted by the insults of sullen, insecure mediocrity. Some psychologists also believe that a good program may distract from the effectiveness of the advertising that pays the bill and calls the tune.

We admire the elegance of today's ads, but we should not then be surprised if even the best programs are chopped up by constant interruptions. This not only keeps the watcher from focusing his brain on the program; it also raises his adrenalin level, which helps to imprint the associated message. Violent programs are expected to do the same.

THE MASS media are not all that successful; consumers often enough will follow a perverse psychology to frustrate "The Hidden Persuaders." (Vance Packard's main evidence of their sinister powers was that some of his targets had read Freud.) The worst aspect of TV is not the broadcasters, successes but their failures and the side effects that they do not understand themselves.

Marshall McLuhan per-

haps had the most incisive comment, that "the medium is the message." TV is alluring and emotionally powerful. It crowds out rational thinking, dialogue and reflective analysis. How can school, or real life, compete with such seductions?

Bold new experiments with pay TV and cable TV are long overdue. Wider competition and freer access to the medium could check some of its disastrous excesses. In the long run, however, our greatest hope lies in the evolution of quite new technologies to compete with broadcast TV for rational communication.

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